

# How to Tell Tall Tales



**"We discovered that tall tales work like potato chips - once we started writing, we couldn't stop at just one."**

*The announcement was made in July: "This year, instead of a humorous speech contest, District 27 will hold its first Tall Tales contest." Everyone in the room responded with an, "Oh!" and I think we may have achieved a record for the variety of ways to say that word. Some were intrigued, some were enthusiastic... but most of our members were confused and concerned.*

What was the cause for all this dread? After all, most of us began telling tall tales on the playground. By the age of five, we found it easy to make a claim like, "I can kick a ball all the way to Kentucky!" or "My dog wagged his tail so fast that the news put out a tornado advisory."

If you've been in a tall tales contest, you know the challenge is to come up with something more than just an outrageous claim - you have to write a contest-worthy story that develops and supports this claim. These can be more difficult to write than their deceptively simple themes suggest. The members of my club are all talented at writing humorous speeches, but our first efforts at writing truly clever tall tales failed.

Our members were intimidated, and only two people signed up for the contest. That changed when our club came up with the following creative ideas. Soon, we discovered tall tales work like potato chips - once we started writing, we couldn't stop at just one.

## How to Begin

- **Watch movies** such as *Big Fish* or *The Secret of Roan Inish* to hear a variety of tall tales being told. Your local library may have books of tall tales to use as examples, as well, but remember that your tale must be original! You cannot simply copy a story from a book and change a few minor details. Also, be sure that your resources feature tall tales and not folk tales. They are distinctly different.
- Your club can practice coming up with ideas by **using tall tales as a Table Topics theme** a month before the contest. Each participant must describe a seemingly implausible event that happened to him or her. To add an extra punch, tell the participants that they may describe a true event if they wish. Then, have the audience guess whether the story is true or a tall tale.
- **Pick a random sentence from a book of famous quotations** and see what sort of a tall tale you can concoct using that sentence as a punch line. After you've tried this a few times, scan through the book for a quotation that captures your fancy. This also makes an excellent Table Topics theme.
- **Write down five frustrating things that have happened to you recently.** Use ordinary problems, such as being stuck in traffic, spilling coffee on your suit, having no time to do the dishes, and so on. Then try to come up with preposterous solutions that would help overcome these problems.

## How to Develop Flavor

After watching the movie *Big Fish*, **try to copy the main character's story-telling abilities.** Notice the use of tone, speed of delivery and volume, as well as the use of language.

- **Play around with accents....** for a while. Then, drop the phony accent but try to retain some of the accent's flavor. In other words, try adding a bit of drawl in places, or colorful phrases such as "Now there comes a time in everyone's life," or "He was a most intelligent man." Many people in our club also found their tales improved when they adopted a "bemused" tone of voice.
- **Tall tales are the perfect speeches to practice alliteration, homonyms, triads, and all the other vocal variety techniques.** Instead of saying "Lady-bugs are found in many regions," say, "From Leesburg

to Louisville, the ladybugs lurk." Used sparingly, rhymes can be very effective. Instead of saying, "The car was damaged," try saying, "Repairs were extensive and expensive."

- **Add surprises** (for example, a song, a dance, a howl, an unexpected body movement). Remember: Surprises are like pepper. A little bit adds a lot of flavor but if add too much, you ruin the result.
- **Many tall tales become livelier with a little bit of repetition.** This works best with any part that incorporates humorous gestures, such as: "The bear went up and down, and up and down, and up and down the mountain."

It is funny to set up a predictable sequence of events, or a predictable sequence of logic, and then **twist the final link in the sequence.** Among successful humorists, the "Rule of Three" is popular. First, set up a joke. Second, reinforce the setup. Third, pay off with a punch line that smashes the pattern. For example, *This porridge is too cold. This porridge is too hot. This porridge is asking to meet our leader!*

## Editing Helps

- **A good tall tale is about three to five minutes long.** After five minutes, the audience begins to lose track of the details, or becomes overwhelmed by too many details. You may find it painful to delete humorous lines - however, a day or two later, when you read the speech again, you will realize the streamlined version is in fact better without one or two of the jokes.
- **If the story involves bragging, consider telling it in the third person.** For example, one member had a story about how dozens of fabulous men wanted to date her. The first time she told this tale, it bombed. Then she changed the main character so that it was a story about the fabulous men who wanted to date her sister. This one change made the same story much funnier.
- **Videotape yourself telling the story.** Even if you don't have access to a video camera, you might be able to do a limited amount of taping with another appliance, such as a digital camera. Just taping a minute or two of your tall tale will help you see what parts need extra "oomph" or paring down.
- **Don't be too childish, and don't be too adult.**
  - Tall tales are meant to amuse adults; childish language and too much fantasy (containing princesses, unicorns, elves, etc.) can make your story sound like a fairy tale. Don't start off your story with "once upon a time" unless you are doing so ironically.
  - On the other hand, tall tales work best when they have a certain wholesomeness. Some of our club members initially wrote "adult" stories with details that were mildly risqué. They sounded like locker room jokes. There may be times, however, when you'll want to keep adult humor in your tall tale. Just remember, any naughty references will be funnier if you tell them in the most chaste manner possible. Strive for innocent phrasing. It may help to picture yourself telling this story to a Ladies Garden Society. Whatever you do, don't wink at the audience; this may seem like a good idea, but it comes across as sleazy.

Follow these steps and your club will soon enjoy writing and performing tall tales without hesitation. It worked well for us. In the end, all 35,000 people in our club wrote tall tales. You believe me, don't you?

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## A Tall Tale Should Include The Following Features:

- **A character with extraordinary abilities** and a specific goal. In the best tall tales these characters are also, for the most part, ordinary people with which the audience can easily identify.

- **A problem** that is solved in a humorous way.
- **A careful blend of exaggerated and credible details.** Don't exaggerate everything in your tale. Use some realistic details to hook your audience, because they can picture themselves in such a situation. Then blend in exaggerated details to amaze them with a tall tale. With this judicious combination of various details you can really set up your audience to laugh. For example, a story about an ordinary person walking into a cave and encountering a bat as big as a bear cub can be hilarious. A story about a ten-foot-tall man digging a tunnel to the center of the Earth, where he encounters dragons and dinosaurs, is more fantasy than funny.
- **A comical ending.** The last lines should make the audience chuckle and/or groan. Clever twists and puns can also be sprinkled throughout the story.

## Facts Tell, Stories Sell

### Follow the BASIC formula.

Facts speak to a person's intellect, stories touch the intellect and the emotion, a much more powerful factor in connecting with people. Fundraisers have been using the story technique for years. People will donate money if they are moved - either by personal experience or by a compelling story. Think about the number of times you are solicited for donations. Which causes are more likely to get your hard-earned dollars? What moved you to give? Watch the Jerry Lewis Telethon and you'll see hundreds of stories about children with muscular dystrophy and other diseases and millions of dollars pledged.

Use the power of story to improve any presentation you deliver. Here are five **BASIC** tips to help:

**Believe** in the story. Speak from your heart or from a real experience. Or pick a well-known story that supports your message.

**Appropriate.** Is the story appropriate for your message and audience?

**Structure.** Include an opening, a problem and a resolution. Stories are about journeys. You start off in one situation, face a problem, overcome the problem and grow or learn from the experience.

**Internalize.** Practice! With enough rehearsal, the story becomes second nature and flows like part of a conversation.

**Captivate.** Bring the story to life and focus on your audience's needs and your message. Use facial expressions, gestures, voice inflection or props, all tools learned in the Competent Communication manual.

Those are the BASICS to help you get started talking with tales. For indepth practice, try Toastmasters' advanced manual on storytelling - it's a great tool for learning to tell and incorporate stories into all your presentations.

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